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Learning through research: The first year experience from the mature students' perspective

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Abstract

This collaborative work from St Martin's College, Salford and Middlesex Universities brings together experiences of mature students, (21+ years of age on entry), in a phenomenological piece of research identifying the different ways in which they feel supported in their undergraduate studies. There is particular value to the collaborative aspect of this research as it pulls together the differences in management and structures from a higher education college, a pre-1992 and post-1992 institutions.

This paper aims to highlight the findings of the research at a point in time to feature the concerns of mature students on entering and the transition into HE, to demonstrate what mature students attribute to encouraging them to succeed and persist in their studies, learning 'what works' type strategies from the three institutions and devising new strategies to support not only this particular group of students, but all during their undergraduate studies.

Introduction

Within the context of widening participation, a greater number of mature students are being encouraged to enter higher education. It is recognised that mature students have differing priorities and concerns to "traditional" students and they often find the higher education environment a difficult one in which to participate (Hall 1998). This paper explores the experience of mature students on various programmes including ones in which mature students are in the majority and those where they are in the minority.—Three institutions collaborated in this research providing a unique comparison of mature student experience not only within these institutions but also between the different types of institutions. The aim of the research is to explore the issues that may be particular to mature students within higher education, in order that institutions may improve the quality of the student experience. The results will enable the development of programmes that provide a high quality learning environment and level of support that allows mature students entering or returning to higher education to succeed in their studies.

Universities have embraced the widening participation agenda and have actively changed admissions policies to accommodate this. Many universities have also introduced retention policies in order to enhance the student experience, to reduce the number of withdrawals and encourage re-entry into the HE system. Mature students are a potentially large market, yet many mature students have differing priorities to the 'traditional' undergraduate and require flexible programmes of study that combine well with their other commitments and life goals. This group of potential students can be a hard-to-reach audience and many students, once recruited, find the shift back into higher education a difficult one in which to succeed.

Yorke's (1999) study of early leavers from six UK universities found that older students are more likely to have family responsibilities of various kinds than the younger students but of all the possible influences on their withdrawal, financial problems were by far the most commonly cited. While younger students refer, more frequently, to the wrong choice of field of study and influences related to their lack of preparedness for living away from home, in contrast, the older students found the demands of employment whilst studying a relatively more powerful influence on their departure. Bamber & Tett's (1999) work on working class adults concluded that for this group, higher education is not only a difficult environment to access but even more difficult in which to survive. In particular the practical need to gain an income alongside studying was highlighted in relation to the flexibility of course design.

Mature students often find the transition to higher education a difficult one and one method of supporting an easier transition to university is through greater collaboration between further and higher education. This can take a number of forms including franchising, 'top-ups' and

foundation degrees. Marks (2002a, 2002b & 2002c) argues that universities are intimidating to adult learners and a 2+2 top up degree based on the US system could be beneficial. This is where 2 years are studied at a further education college with the final 2 years at a university. This transfer from FE to HE has been found to be problematic with the need for, perhaps, whole degrees taught in FE Colleges (Bird & Crawley, 1994). Partnerships between educational institutions can result in synergy with the FE Colleges providing local market knowledge and accessibility combined with a university's national and international status (Duke, 1997). Access courses are often seen as a point of transition and can provide a useful bridging zone, however the risks associated with this route are explored in Brine & Waller (2004). These risks include financial insecurity and changes to learner identity. In addition to these anticipated problems, there are other factors including class identity and loss of existing relationships that may influence the decision to continue on to and succeed in higher education.

The integration of mature and younger students on a programme may also be problematic. Research conducted previously at the University of Salford in the Faculty of Health and Social Care (Trotter and Cove, 2005) discovered that it was difficult to satisfy the needs of both mature and younger students in terms of their teaching and learning requirements.

For this piece of phenomenological research programmes have been selected that will allow comparison of the mature student experience where they are in the majority or the minority on their programme. The research at St Martin's College was conducted in the School of Applied Social Sciences and Business Studies and the Faculty of Health. At Middlesex two programmes in Health and Social Sciences and the Business School were chosen and at Salford, programmes in the new Salford Business School and the School of Health Care Professions have been researched. Focus groups were carried out in all three institutions with both sets of students, those based on the programme where mature students are considered the majority (health programmes) and the focus group where older students are very much in the minority (business programmes). The broad aim was to discover the range of opinions, beliefs and emotions tied to the mature student experience. The students were questioned about their expectations, motivations, sacrifices, transition, induction, the programme and the assessment regime, support networks and general reflections.

Results were then themed by key words within the data from the focus groups. The results were further broken down into programmes and institution in order of reach institution and programme to be comparable.

According to the results, these have been themed either by institution or by programmes.

Findings

The focus groups were asked about their expectations of university life. Lowe & Cook (2003) carried out similar research investigating the expectations of students prior to joining the University of Ulster and their experience two months later. That study came to the conclusion that for many students these did not match due to poor preparation and poor advice. The mature students in this study expected a full timetable, debt and a work hard/play hard balance. There was also a general nervousness about fitting in as the following quotation shows:

Loads of really clever people, much much better than me

This notion of 'fitting in' has been researched in a number of studies (Reay et al 2001, Hutchings and Archer, 2001 and Ball et al 2002). Conclusions drawn from all these studies indicate that students choose universities where they feel they will be accepted and that already has a student body similar to themselves.

The students were also asked about their motivations for wanting to go to university at this stage in their lives. For many, especially from the Health programmes, it was to open up a change of direction and a chance *to leave poxy jobs for a professional career*. For some, on

the Business programmes, it was to *have something additional to make you stand out from the crowd*. For others it was considered to be a last chance:

I think we're so scared of and so grateful if you like for the chance, the second chance, and so scared of failing, I think you really put your back into it and appreciate it a lot more.

Marks, Turner & Osborne (2003) analysed the reasons behind adult participation in higher education, paying particular attention to gender issues. For many, the idea of being a good parent had pushed them into higher education. For women, this had meant being a good role model whilst for the men this had meant the ability to earn a higher wage. This role model concept came out in our study too as shown by the following quote:

I'm also doing this to show my children that you can do it at any age. That nothing can stop you if you want it.

I want my children to have a better life and that means more studying for a better job

Very much related to this was a question regarding the sacrifices that the students felt they had made in order to go to university. This was wide ranging with some, although few students expressed no sacrifices, and saw everything as a positive move. In fact some students told of relatively serious sacrifices of financial security, job security, lifestyle, time with family, social life (old friends) and relationships. For international students there was the added loss of culture, home, familiarity and in some cases even support. Some cases highlighted substantial sacrifices:

I didn't want to travel and didn't want to live in halls so I sold my house and bought in the area.

The potential loss of social contacts and relationships can be damaging as these support networks can be a factor between withdrawal and remaining (Parmar & Trotter, 2005).

The students were asked how they had coped with the transition to HE in the first few weeks of university life and more specifically, during the induction process. In terms of transition, student comments included:

Initial concerns integrating with younger students

Overwhelmed with the amount of work involved and new skills to develop

Not enough done to help integrate mature students

The induction process came in for particular criticism at all three institutions. Tinto (1993) highlights the induction process as an important stage in encouraging early adjustment and social integration to university life that helps with progression and retention. In Yorke (2000) of the six key determinants of withdrawal three relate to this early experience, namely poor quality of the student experience, unhappiness of social environment and dissatisfaction with provision. One issue of particular concern highlighted in this research was that of 'misguided guidance'.

This describes the information or instructions given to students which in areas misguide them and result in frustration from the student towards the institution. An example would be telling students in advance that induction or 'freshers week' was every day from 9-5pm, when actually after arranging childcare and work commitments, when they turn up they are only required, or activities are only specific to them, for a few hours on Wednesday and Friday. Many mature students gave the impression that they felt that the induction period heavily catered for the younger students with little information or activities related to the interests of older students. These quotes relating to the induction process demonstrate this:

It was a blur, too much useless information, herding.

It's cliquey and it's all related to drinking

Wanted group exercise, team building and ice breakers

The next area students were asked about concerned the programmes and the assessment regimes. For the business students (mature students in the minority), the programme was better than expected but was generally considered to be hard work and demanding. Overall the students felt there were a lot of assessments both coursework and exams. One issue that was raised was the request for feedback from exams, in some cases it had been fifteen years since the student has sat an exam and they felt the need for some kind of feedback was paramount. Overall, across the programmes and institutions students were generally happy with feedback received on coursework. Indeed, much research has been carried out in this area with Krause (2001) looking, in particular, at the first major essay writing assignment as a door to either academic integration or attrition. She writes of feedback: *The marker's interaction with first year students is another critical factor contributing to the quality of students' integration via the essay marking and feedback process.* (p163)

The healthcare students presented with different issues. For 2 of the institutions the programmes had not met expectations as they thought it would be more academic and less practical. The use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) was criticised at one institution as being unhelpful and disorganized. The students also had difficulty with placements. This mismatch between expectations and experience endorses Low's & Cook's (2003) research at Ulster.

When asked about support networks both sets of students mentioned that they received most of their support from peers, mainly other mature students. Family support was also seen as key.

My children are really, really proud of me for doing this

It's peer group support that's got me here today. I don't think I'd be here today without the support of everybody.

The 3 institutions demonstrated no clear agreement in identifying whether programmes consisting predominantly of mature students (healthcare programmes) are catering better for mature students than those programmes where mature students are the minority (business programmes).

In general, there were very different experiences between business students and healthcare students and different experiences between the institutions.—Programmes with a majority of mature students are not necessarily the best at catering for them, as evidenced above, so there is no easy, quick solution to these problems. However, institutions may wish to ensure that they have achieved the following:

- Removed 'misguided guidance'
- Ensured that induction is inclusive for all students
- Encourage students to engage with one another to promote peer support

Many of the issues highlighted by the focus groups are applicable for all students, not just the over 21s. Addressing these could therefore, improve the student experience across the first year.

For all the students in our focus groups the experience and sacrifices had been worthwhile as the following three quotes show:

I was in tears of happiness on my first day

I see things differently now, it's as if my brain's been woken up

Good positive experience, would advise anyone to do it

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